



## SOCIAL SERVICES NEWS

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### **WARNING SIGNS OF ELDER ABUSE, NEGLECT OR EXPLOITATION**

**HICKORY** -- Most people are aware of child abuse and spousal abuse. But what is elder abuse?

This little-discussed problem exists in Catawba County and elsewhere. It is believed to be significantly under-reported because of many elderly persons' shame or fear.

However, in Fiscal Year 2010-2011, Catawba County Adult Protective Services received 299 reports of suspected adult abuse, neglect or exploitation. Of these, 112 were substantiated. In North Carolina, nearly 20,000 reports of abuse, neglect or exploitation of vulnerable and older adults were made in the state's 100 counties during this time.

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day is observed on June 15. In North Carolina, Gov. Beverly Perdue has proclaimed May 11 through June 18 as Vulnerable and Elder Abuse Awareness Month.

Adult Protective Services, a part of Catawba County Social Services, is responsible for investigating cases of suspected abuse, neglect or exploitation of adults living in the county. Although this problem often occurs with disabled elderly adults, the law covers anyone 18 or older who is disabled.

"Abuse" refers to the willful infliction of physical pain, injury or mental anguish, unreasonable confinement, or the willful deprivation by a caretaker of services, which are necessary to maintain mental and physical health.

"Exploitation" refers to the illegal or improper use of a disabled adult or his resources for another's profit or advantage.

"Neglect" refers to a disabled adult who is either living alone or not able to provide for him/her self the services that are necessary to maintain his or her mental or physical health, or is not receiving services from his caretaker.

"Self-neglect" refers to a disabled adult who lives alone or has no caretaker and is not able to provide necessary services to maintain his or her mental and physical health.

Friends and relatives of elderly, disabled persons are often concerned about whether a senior is being cared for properly. However, it can be hard to determine whether abuse, neglect or exploitation is occurring.

Here are some signs to look for:

- Unexplained injuries, such as bruises, cuts, burns, broken bones, etc.
- Significant weight loss, malnutrition, dehydration.
- Untreated physical problems, such as bed sores.
- Unsafe living conditions (no heat or running water, faulty wiring or fire hazards).
- Threatening, belittling or controlling caregiver behavior.
- Another person's name added to the senior's bank account, or frequent checks made out to "cash."
- Significant withdrawals from the elder's bank accounts.
- Items or cash missing from the senior's household.
- Sudden changes in will or power of attorney.
- Refusal of the caregiver to let you see the senior alone.

Unfortunately, self-neglect is also a common occurrence. Some signs of self-neglect include the following:

- Forgetfulness in turning off the stove or gas.
- Wandering.
- Inability to cook, eat, bathe, toilet, dress or care for one's self.
- Rapid weight loss or dehydration.
- Causing small fires.
- Living in an unsafe dwelling.
- Inappropriate use of medications.
- Inability to communicate needs.

Any of these situations may be a sign that further investigation is needed. If you have concerns about a senior (or a disabled adult of any age), you should call Adult Protective Services at the Department of Social Services in the county where the person lives. In Catawba County, call 828-695-5609.

Give as much information about the elderly or disabled person as you can, and explain why you think they may need protective services. Helpful information includes the following: the adult's name, address, phone number, age, disability, and living arrangements.

Your name and information is kept confidential unless a court of law orders disclosure. You may also make the report anonymously. You can choose to be notified of the status of the report by phone or mail.

One key point is that self-neglect is not covered by this law if the adult is not disabled. If an elderly person is mentally competent and not being coerced, they are free to make their own choices.

However, if they are disabled, Adult Protective Services is empowered to take action. If, after investigation, the senior does not meet the requirements of the law, Adult Protective Services will still try to provide information about services that may improve the elder's life.